

Notes on Parent Engagement

In general, we encourage school personnel to be the first line of discussion with a parent whose child has been identified to have a school mentor (whether internal staff member, external volunteer or peer mentor). We say discussion because we believe that a conversation can allow for much better communication and less misunderstanding than sending a letter home. Why?

- 1. Not all parents speak English well or at all. Reading a letter in another language can be a challenge.
- 2. The average American adult reads at the 8th grade level so a letter in educational terms might not be understood by the average reader.
- 3. Not all concepts translate to another culture equally well. For example, there is no direct translation in Spanish for the word "mentor".
- 4. And most importantly, speaking allows the parent to hear the tone of your news. So there is less likelihood that the parent will turn this into some sort of indictment about their parenting.

What do we mean about the tone of your news? You have good news for the family. We say, "put a smile on your face" and make the call.

"I'm excited to tell you that I have a great opportunity for Tommy (or Sally or whomever.) He has a chance to have a mentor. I think this would be great for Tommy because I believe that he is a child who would take advantage of this opportunity. I wish I had a mentor for every child in the school but I don't. I hope you'll join with me and let Tommy have this good experience. He's a great kid."

Notice how I said, would take advantage of this opportunity. I didn't say that he really needs this because he's in so much trouble or he's so difficult. I said, would take advantage of this opportunity. I didn't even say he would benefit from it – that implies that he needs help. So it's all positive.

Once the parent agrees, the school person should make a note of the date and conversation for their files AND then should send home the permission slip. I attach a sample of what a letter could look like.

We work with over 240 school based mentoring programs. Across the board, parents welcome having someone else on the "team" of helping their children be the best that they can be. After all, as one parent put it, "being the parent of a teen or pre-teen can be exhausting. It's nice to know you have someone else on the team with you."



I was lucky enough to be invited to speak at the Texas Success Mentors Summit a few weeks ago. Several people new to the project from the audience expressed some of the same concerns that your school district has expressed. They had school personnel from two of the Success Mentor Schools answering questions. Both of them said they had NO problems with parents expressing concerns, worrying about why or even worrying about a "stigma". They said that the parents were so pleased their children were chosen. And they emphasized that they used the strength-based approach that I described above.

So to make this a checklist:

- 1. Someone calls the parent with a smile on their face.
- 2. They give a positive message about how this is a great opportunity for their youngster.
- 3. They follow up with a written permission letter also very positive.
- 4. And, by the way, you take the same positive tone with the kids.

Hope this is helpful.

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